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"Queen of Sounds" Maria Szymanowska

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Abstract:

This article aims to illuminate the remarkable yet often overlooked contributions of Maria Szymanowska (1789-1831), a Polish pianist and composer whose significance in the musical landscape of the early 19th century deserves renewed attention. Drawing upon a wealth of archival documents and contemporaneous recollections, a detailed portrait of Szymanowska's life and artistic endeavours is meticulously crafted. Central to the narrative of Szymanowska's life are her enduring friendships with Princess Zinaida Volkonskaya and Princess Varvara Gorchakova. Through an in-depth exploration of their relationships, we gain insight into the social milieu in which Szymanowska operated, as well as the profound influence these connections had on her personal and professional development. In examining Szymanowska's life and legacy, this article seeks to restore her rightful place in the annals of music history. By shedding light on her achievements and enduring influence, we honor the memory of a pioneering artist whose contributions continue to resonate with audiences around the world.

Keywords:

Szymanowska, 19th century, Volkonskaya, Gorchakova, Chopin.

La "reine des sons" Maria Szymanowska

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Résumé :

Cet article vise à mettre en lumière les contributions remarquables mais souvent méconnues de Maria Szymanowska (1789-1831), une pianiste et compositrice polonaise dont l'importance dans le paysage musical du début du XIXe siècle mérite une attention renouvelée. S'appuyant sur une multitude de documents d'archives et de souvenirs contemporains, l'ouvrage dresse un portrait détaillé de la vie et des activités artistiques de Szymanowska. Les amitiés durables de Szymanowska avec les princesses Zinaida Volkonskaya et Varvara Gorchakova sont au cœur du récit de la vie de Szymanowska. Grâce à une exploration approfondie de leurs relations, nous comprenons mieux le milieu social dans lequel évoluait Szymanowska, ainsi que l'influence profonde que ces liens ont eue sur son développement personnel et professionnel. En examinant la vie et l'héritage de Szymanowska, cet article cherche à lui

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redonner la place qui lui revient dans les annales de l'histoire de la musique. En mettant en lumière ses réalisations et son influence durable, nous honorons la mémoire d'une artiste pionnière dont les contributions continuent de trouver un écho auprès des publics du monde entier.

Mot-clés :

Szymanowska, XIXe siècle, Volkonskaya, Gorchakova, Chopin.

The remarkable Polish pianist Maria Szymanowska gained European acclaim in the 19th century and emerged as a composer as well. However, akin to many other figures in Polish musical culture, she was subsequently undeservedly forgotten. She became the first woman to appear in public as a professional pianist. The phenomenon of Maria Szymanowska lies in her extraordinary pianistic and compositional prowess, achieved without outstanding piano teachers or composition professors. She almost independently cultivated her thoughts in both domains(1).

Few women in the first half of the 19th century managed to leave a significant mark on the history and culture of several European countries. For Poland, the "queen of sounds" is among the individuals constituting the nation's pride. In her works, characteristic traits of Polish pianism began to manifest, the global significance of which was affirmed by Frederic Chopin, who did not overlook her contributions. Szymanowska is relevant to our time with her aspiration to overcome cultural, religious, and geopolitical differences, her thirst to establish herself as an individual and a musician, her persistent determination, and self-improvement.

Marianna Agata Wołowska was born in Warsaw on 14th December 1789, into the family of the affluent brewer and landlord Mr. Franciszek Wołowski and his wife Barbara. She was the fourth of ten children in the family. The parents aimed to provide their talented and receptive daughter with a comprehensive education, intending to mold her into not only a

flawlessly cultured secular woman but also a truly cultured individual(2).

Music always resonated in their home, with Polish and foreign musicians frequently visiting. The Wołowski couple regularly hosted representatives of the European intellectual and creative elite, including musicians such as Franz Xaver Mozart, Karol Lipiński, August Klingenfeld, Karol Kurpiński, Angelica Catalani, and Józef Elsner, as well as the French violinist Jacques Pierre Joseph Rode.

The girl’s musical talent manifested at a very early age. Being a prodigy, she enthralled with her improvisations on the harpsichord. When she turned eight, she began piano lessons with the pedagogue Lisowski(3). Two years later, he advised Mariana’s parents to entrust her musical education to the pianist Tomasz Gremm, with whom she studied for about four years(2). Even in childhood, the girl’s playing attracted the attention of Polish and foreign musicians attending her parents’ salon. Józef Elsner, the future teacher of Frédéric Chopin, who was gradually gaining undisputed authority in the musical circles of Warsaw, began to review the early creative experiments of the young pianist and, as her biographers suggest, offer advice in composition(4). Elsner conducted performances at the Warsaw Opera, where his operas and melodramas were staged, and his piano sonatas and polonaises were performed, capturing the attention of music enthusiasts(5).

In 1810, after Haydn’s death, his favourite pupil and outstanding Polish composer Franciszek Lessel moved from Vienna to Warsaw. He became a regular visitor to the Wołowski salon, a friend and mentor to Maria, sharing with her the knowledge acquired from Haydn and his own experiences. It is worth noting that Lessel often turned to Ukrainian folk song creativity, sensing its closeness to Polish folk songs, rooted in the historical commonality of Slavic peoples.

In 1811, the young pianist’s performance was attended by

August Klingenfeld at her parents' home. By these years, polonaises by Michał Ogiński had already gained popularity in Poland, resonating in salons across Warsaw, including the Wołowski residence, where they closely followed all musical innovations. Ogiński was a polymath with a broad intellectual horizon, excellent education, proficiency in multiple foreign languages, and exceptional skills as a violinist and talented composer. His biography was replete with captivating events and unexpected twists, making it a compelling script for a suspenseful film: secret diplomatic missions, military operations, and border crossings in disguise. Add to this his constant presence in the aristocratic circles of Paris, London, St. Petersburg, and Milan, engaging in refined and sophisticated conversations in salons, attending operas, and participating in a string quartet(6).

Szymanowska continued the creative exploration in piano miniature that Ogiński had successfully initiated. There is no doubt that young Marynia played Ogiński's polonaises, the influence of which later distinctly manifested in her own compositions(7). She often included Ogiński's polonaises in the programs of her concerts. From London, she wrote to the composer: "I cannot refrain, Count, from performing your polonaises in any society; no one finds listening to them tiresome, everyone considers them delightful"(8).

She herself composed several polonaises in a similar style. Ogiński closely monitored the pianist's career, from her initial performances in Warsaw to her grand triumph in Florence in 1824. At that time, he remarked: "The continuous cultivation of her talent, as well as her voyages, have immeasurably perfected her playing style, from which, it seems, there is nothing more to demand, even from the most severe critics"(9).

Among Ogiński's documents is the program of Szymanowska's concert in Florence, dated November 9, 1824. In commemoration of this meeting, he inscribed a polonaise in F major in the pianist's album. In return, she presented him with a

manuscript bearing the dedication "Le Murmure. Nocturne, composée par Marie Szymanowska, offert par l'Auteur à Mr le Comte Michel Ogiński" and also gifted a "Valse à trois mains" composed by Maria Szymanowska.

The girl mastered her unique technique early on and achieved tremendous expressiveness in her playing through her own diligent work and the advice of experienced musicians she encountered throughout her career. She closely monitored the evolution of the piano as a musical instrument.

Kazimira Wołowska, the sister of Szymanowska, was not devoid of compositional abilities; she was a proficient singer and pianist. Kurpiński published her romance, titled "Remembrance of Happiness" with lyrics by an anonymous author, in the musical supplement to the issue of the "Musical and Dramatic Weekly" dated May 23, 1821.

Maria gave her first public concerts in musical salons in Warsaw and Paris in 1810. Upon returning from France at the age of 20, she married the landowner Teofil Jozef Szymanowski, whose estate was located in Otłoczyn near Warsaw. She gave birth to twins, Helen and Romuald, in 1811, and Celina in 1812.

The Polish physician Stanisław Morawski, who was well-acquainted with the Szymanowski family, wrote:

Her husband was a wealthy, respectable, civilized, enlightened man, a true husband, a man, a mari monster, who could never tune in to the same wavelength as his young wife. Therefore, he always created dissonances in the domestic orchestra. A lover of agriculture and horses, he invariably wanted to turn his wife into a caring, good housekeeper, accustomed to the charms not of the village but of rural farming. Unfortunately, all this led to completely opposite results (Morawski 1927: 160).

The Szymanowski couple spent winters in Warsaw. Maria's unusual career was facilitated by the existence of cultural and musical salons, the majority of which were hosted by women. Since their cultural and social ambitions were limited by the

ethical and social conventions of the time, these women became natural allies of Szymanowska(10).

From 1815, despite her husband's protests, Maria began performing in public concerts for the Warsaw audience. Unfortunately, the musical content of salons and their aesthetic ideals often conflicted with societal norms of "good manners", universal devotion to fashion, and social aloofness, which dramatically affected the destinies of many individuals and constrained the possibilities for free creativity in salons.

During her marriage, Szymanowska rarely appeared on stage; predominantly, she performed in Warsaw salons. Fragmentary information about her concert performances during her marriage years, receiving high praise in the Warsaw press, is available. Her teacher Elsner, in a letter to Breitkopf and Härtel dated June 24, 1818, emphasised that the press presented Szymanowska as a Polish pianist(11).

In 1819, Xaver Mozart, the son of the great Mozart, visited the Wołowski family and left a note in Szymanowska's album. In November of the same year, the renowned Italian singer Angelica Catalani (née Valabrègue) gave four concerts in Warsaw. She visited the Wołowski family and became friends with their talented daughter(12).

In the summer of 1820, a correspondent for the journal *Nevsky Zritel* edited by Wilhelm Karlovich von Küchelbecker, wrote about a young lady who "with astonishing skill, plays on the piano the most difficult compositions of Beethoven, Field, and Ries"(13).

Maria Szymanowska was an independent, thoroughly modern woman who viewed her pianism as a profession and devoted much effort to reach a very high level. This independence and self-assurance transformed her from the daughter of a Warsaw brewer into a European lady.

Her concert tours were a grand undertaking, organised with the assistance of her siblings, several guardians-sponsors, and

friends. Between 1815 and 1820, Szymanowska embarked on her first concert tours, initially performing for Prince Radziwill in Poland and later in Dresden, Vienna, London, St. Petersburg, and Berlin. According to the tradition of that time, these concerts were private. Gradually, her fame grew, and new connections emerged, crucial for her subsequent career.

She was not only a virtuoso pianist but also a recognized composer. Three of her songs were included in the 1816 collection “Historical Songs” with lyrics by Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, which would be republished throughout the 19th century.

Despite her husband’s dissatisfaction, Maria performed public concerts in Warsaw. Her husband and his family disapproved, considering it inappropriate for a woman of their circle to participate in public concerts. Therefore, in 1818, she played in a limited circle of music enthusiasts in London and Berlin, without giving any public concerts. By this time, Maria Szymanowska’s name resonated throughout Europe. Polish and foreign critics acknowledged her high mastery and the national uniqueness of her playing.

In 1820, the firm Breitkopf and Härtel began publishing Szymanowska’s works: her 20 studies and preludes for piano, highly valued by Schumann and dedicated to Zofia Hodkiewicz, were released. As a second release, a Caprice on the theme of John Field’s romance Zykonnda appeared. The third release included “Six Marches for piano and a Divertissement for piano” with violin accompaniment. The fourth release contained a “Grand Waltz for piano four hands and a Serenade for piano with cello accompaniment”, dedicated to Prince Antoni Radziwiłł (1775-1833), the governor of the Grand Duchy of Poznań and an amateur musician, known for his music for Goethe’s Faust. In the fifth release, Szymanowska included six minutes dedicated to her sister Kazimiera Wołowska and a Grand Piano Fantasy. The sixth release of her compositions featured a large cycle of dances

dedicated to Vera Vyazemskaya and a transcription of Prince Alexander Golitsyn's romance "A chaque instant". In the same year, six romances for voice and piano based on the verses of Shakespeare, Pushkin the Father, and Cardinal de Bernis were published.

The popularity of Szymanowska's works in her homeland and abroad, along with the flattering evaluation of her pianistic talent by authoritative musicians, convinced her to dedicate herself to professional musical activities. In essence, she occupied a prominent place among Polish musicians, no longer considered an amateur with the publication of a dozen pieces by Europe's leading music publisher.

As is known, the moral climate of the noble society of that time considered public musical concert activities for members of the noble class as reprehensible and degrading, especially for women. It took courage, a strong character, and a deep love for music to break free from the shackles of social traditions. Maria's marriage was not a happy one, as her husband believed she devoted too much time to music and seemed to neglect him. In reality, the couple had little in common.

However, as Szymanowska's fame grew, her relationship with her husband and his family worsened. They believed that music distracted her from family and household responsibilities, and it was deemed inappropriate for a woman of her standing to appear on the concert stage. Ten years later, in 1820, the marriage was mutually dissolved. Maria retained the surname Szymanowska and custody of the three children. From then on, she had to provide for herself and her children through her art and talent. The choice was made: she divorced her husband; the children remained under her care, and the path to becoming a concert pianist opened up before her.

Now, music for Maria became a profession that had to secure a livelihood for her and her children. As a divorced mother of three, she earned a living through performances and teaching

at a time when divorced women, especially women-pianists performing for money, were undesirable and barely tolerated.

During her tours across Europe, Szymanowska wrote letters in which she dreamed of reuniting with her children. In 1823, the rising star Maria wrote in a letter to Pyotr Vyazemsky, “My ex-husband has already remarried, and I do not get married and will never get married”(14). Numerous sources and vivid portraits depict the outward appearance of the pianist: Maria Szymanowska was very attractive. Her decision never to tie herself with the bonds of marriage is undoubtedly explained not by the absence of worthy suitors for Szymanowska’s hand but by her firm resolution not to abandon her professional musical activities, which her husband had tried to hinder.

Before embarking on concert tours across Western Europe, Szymanowska decided to perform in both Russian capitals. In the first third of the 19th century, St. Petersburg was recognised as the world’s capital that many outstanding musicians sought to visit. Welcoming European stars, St. Petersburg opened new stages of concert performance in Russia, unseen before.

The first pianists who arrived in St. Petersburg showcased a new performance aesthetic: concert playing from memory. For the first time in Russia, the piano sounded as a solo instrument in a solo concert. The appearance of a woman as a soloist was even more unusual, and that woman turned out to be the Polish pianist, Maria Szymanowska.

Her concerts in the spring of 1822 in St. Petersburg and Moscow were tremendously successful. In St. Petersburg, she performed at the court, and by the decree of Alexander I, Szymanowska was bestowed the title of the “first pianist of their Imperial Highnesses” Elizabeth Alexeievna and Maria Feodorovna. At that time, this title served as a kind of protection for a divorced woman, as it not only allowed her to play in high-society salons but also to be a professional artist, a free artist, thus having the opportunity to earn a living for herself and her

children.

In February 1823, she gave a concert in Kyiv jointly with the "Polish Paganini" Lipiński. On the ninth of February, the violinist inscribed in her album a D minor caprice "as a sign of true respect for the sublime talent of Mrs. Szymanowska". She performed in Dubno, Kremenets, Lviv, Vinnytsia, Zhytomyr, and then embarked on an extensive concert tour across Europe: Poznań, Karlovy Vary, Mariánské Lázně, where she played for Goethe, and at his invitation spent half a month in Weimar. Her letter dated August 1 to Prince Vyazemsky contains a mention of her acquaintance with Goethe[(15)].

On August 18, Goethe completed and dedicated a poem titled "Aussohnung" (Reconciliation) to the pianist, which arose "under the impression of the high art of Mrs. Szymanowska"[(17)].

Da fühlte sich dass es ewig bliebe!
Das Doppelglück der Töne wie der Liebe.

The music of Szymanowska brought the great poet the happiness of reconciliation with the suffering brought by the passion that came in his later years. In Mariánské Lázně, she met the eminent Czech composer Václav Jan Tomášek (1774-1850) and his future wife Wilhelmina Ebert. Tomášek recounted this meeting in his unfinished autobiography, published in German in the late 1840s in the Prague almanac Libussa. Of all the vocal works she listened to, she highlighted an artless song on Hanka's lyrics, intonationally close to Czech folk songs[(18)].

After performing in Jena, Pilsen, and Dresden, Szymanowska headed to Leipzig, where on October 12, she participated in a concert organized by the local society of music lovers. In a letter to her parents dated October 14, Kazimiera Wołowska reported that over seven hundred people attended the concert. In a postscript added to this letter by her sister, Szymanowska noted, "Connoisseurs here say that I do not play, but declaim"[(19)]. On October 22, the sisters left Leipzig and travelled to Weimar, where they stayed with Ottilie von Goethe, the great writer's

daughter-in-law. In one of his letters to his friend, the German architect and archaeologist Sulpiz Boisserée, Goethe recounted:

The incomparable pianist, Mrs. Szymanowska, whose presence and invaluable talent already brought me so much joy in Mariánské Lázně, arrived immediately after you. My house, for 14 days, was the gathering place for all music-loving friends, attracted by the high art and charm of the artist. The court and the city, stirred up by her, lived immersed in sounds and joy[20].

In early November, Szymanowska gave a concert at Goethe’s home and in the town hall. In addition to her compositions, she performed a rondo from Klingen’s First Concerto, Hummel’s A minor concerto, Beethoven’s Quintet for piano and wind instruments, and Field’s Nocturne for piano with the accompaniment of a string quartet.

Szymanowska’s repertoire gradually expanded, and her creative exploration as a pianist became diverse. At the same time, her compositional interests did not wane. In a letter to her parents, she wrote to her father that the Leipzig publisher Peters had undertaken the distribution of her works in Germany and asked to send the copies of her piano pieces kept in Warsaw[21].

On November 5, 1823, Maria Szymanowska and her sister left Weimar and headed to Berlin, where they stayed for about two months. In mid-February 1824, they arrived in Paris, where their brother Stanisław also joined them. On April 11, a concert was held in the hall of the Paris Conservatoire, where Maria played alongside the virtuoso violinist Pierre Baillot, with whom Michał Ogiński had taken violin lessons in his youth. Here she met Cherubini, who had known her since she was a child, as reported by Stanisław Wołowski from Paris in letters to their parents[22].

On April 20, 1824, Szymanowska left Paris and gave a concert in Abbeville, organised with the participation of the French violinist Eloi de Viges. From Calais, she reached London, where she stayed for two and a half months.

In London, Szymanowska frequently performed in the salons

of the London aristocracy, gave lessons, which, according to her letters to her family, were paid as well as her performances. She also appeared on the concert stage. Her concerts, invariably successful, featured the renowned Italian singer Giuditta Pasta (1798–1865), who was touring in London at the time, and the Spanish tenor and composer Manuel del Pópulo Vicente García (1775-1832), who was living there during that period. The violinist Christian Gottfried Kahl Keszler (1777-1827) also participated in her concerts[(23)].

During one of Szymanowska's concerts, the symphony orchestra was conducted by Johann Baptist Cramer (1771-1858), a German-born musician who spent most of his life in London. In Szymanowska's album, there is a small piece titled "La tranquillité" dedicated to her by Cramer.

Cramer's teacher and Field's teacher, the Italian composer and pianist Muzio Clementi, who lived in London for a long time, dedicated a polonaise canon to her, writing the beginning of it in her album in July 1824. A short piece titled *Grave con moto* was composed for Szymanowska by Ferdinand Ries, a German pianist and composer who was a student of Beethoven. She included Ries's works in her repertoire later on.

In July 1824, Szymanowska left London with her brother and sister. Undoubtedly, the year of touring brought her great moral satisfaction. The leading musicians of the West duly appreciated her talent and skill. Gradually, her own compositions also gained recognition, and she often performed them in her concerts and solo performances. From London, where she gave both public and private concerts, she travelled through Geneva to Italy, armed with recommendations from Rossini[(24)]. In Florence in 1825, Maria met Ogiński, who provided substantial support to Polish cultural figures scattered throughout Europe at that time.

After completing her trip to Italy, Szymanowska returned to London, where she stayed until September 13. On May 16, she performed in London "plus brilliant que jamais", as she wrote to

her parents the next day[25].

The first extended concert tour of Szymanowska marked the conquest of European fame. Her artistry earned recognition thanks to her vivid talent and the national uniqueness of her art.

From her maiden years to the final years of her short-lived life, Szymanowska amassed autographs of writers and composers she encountered, musical scores with dedicatory inscriptions, poems, watercolours, and drawings by masters. These albums reflect the depth of relationships that Szymanowska managed to cultivate, and the immense respect her contemporaries held for her and her art. It is a unique collection of compliments from many renowned individuals who sought to be remembered on the pages of these albums.

The renowned composer Cherubini, captivated by her playing, “as a token of gratitude, admiration, respect, and devotion”, inscribed his “Piano Fantasy” in Maria’s album[26]. Lessel presented Szymanowska with the autograph of his teacher Joseph Haydn, accompanied by a note certifying its authenticity[27]. In addition to Beethoven’s minuet, whose manuscript the author gifted to Maria, her collection also includes two letters from the great composer to Nikolai Golitsyn, dating back to 1823-1824[28].

The well-known Dresden composer and organist August Alexander Klinger (1783-1852) dedicated to her a small romance, Larghetto con expression, “composed for Mrs. Szymanowska as a token of gratitude and admiration for her outstanding talent”, as stated in the composer’s inscription on the romances’ autograph, dated July 9, 1811.

Even in Warsaw, Szymanowska interacted with representatives of the Russian community. Alexander Pushkin’s sister, Olga Pavlishcheva, recalled that their father, Sergey Pushkin, left numerous beautiful poems and a message to her in ladies” albums, interspersed with prose and verses introducing her to contemporary Russian literature. It was written in Warsaw

in 1814 when Sergey Lvovich was in charge of the commissariat commission of the reserve army(29).

In Warsaw, Maria became acquainted with the Vyazemsky spouses, who would become close friends. Closer ties formed with representatives of the Russian community, especially with Prince Vyazemsky and his wife. Connections with Polish musical circles expanded, and a friendship with Karol Kurpiński developed, who also dedicated his piano piece to her in 1816.

In 1822, the pianist met Jan Hummel, a famous pupil of Mozart and renowned pianist, who also performed in the Russian capital. In memory of this meeting, the composer composed and inscribed in Maria Szymanowska's album an impromptu for piano, Vivace assai, accompanied by a friendly inscription, dated March 24, 1822.

Before departing, Maria left an album with Pyotr Vyazemsky for additional entries. On December 9, 1822, the renowned poet Ivan Dmitriev, in his dedication to Szymanowska in her album, expressed the idea of the elevated role of art in bringing nations together:

In talents, kinship intertwines, their font aligns,
For them, the world unfolds; no war, no boundary confines;
From Vistula's grace to Neva's flow, through Apennines" proud line.
They exchange the ties of brotherhood, a bond benign.

In 1823, Szymanowska performed in German salons among the local aristocracy. Subsequently, she sojourned in Kassel, where she encountered the renowned German composer and violinist Ludwig Spohr, who inscribed a small polyphonic piece (a canon-riddle) in her album "as a token of respect and admiration"(30).

In 1824, an autograph from François-Adrien Boieldieu, a well-known opera composer, was preserved in Szymanowska's album, on his musical manuscript. She performed his sonata for violin and piano alongside Bayo. Louis Emmanuel Jadin, a

professor at the Paris Conservatoire, dedicated his piano concerto to Maria.

During her time in London, she formed a friendship with Carl Maria von Weber, who left his autograph in the pianist's album, dated April 26, 1826. On the sixteenth of May, Szymanowska gave a concert, and before her departure, she learned of the untimely death of the young German composer.

In the Moscow Telegraph of 1837, issue number 23, Vyazemsky provides several poems inscribed in Szymanowska's album by Denis Davydov and Nikolai Gnedich.

In vain you think, oh, can it be,
That a hussar, fame's devotee,
Loved only battles, fierce and gory,
And shunned affections tenderly.
Ah, oft the hussar sighs, it's true,
Beneath his shako, in spring's embrace,
A dove within, its nest it traces,
In love's sweet twine, a different view.

Denis Davydov Hussar (1822)

As in the thunder of harps,
A novice's mournful sound,
Alone and filled with sorrow profound,
As "midst the columns of tombstones" gleam,
A humble urn above a dream,
Leans hearts into a contemplation deep,
Between Kameny's songs, a vigil to keep.
The gaze to the unknown singer may turn,
A reflection in the heart, a solitary yearn.

Nikolai Gnedich Dedication to Maria Szymanowska (1822)

And on 9 October next year, Nikolai Karamzin wrote his couplet in the album:

We see the shadow of happiness in the dreams of earthly light:
Happiness exists somewhere: no shadow without an object.

These inspired poetic lines speak of the addressee, of an

extraordinary, talented personality, and feminine charm.

In various sources, claims arise that Maria was a pupil of John Field[4], yet these assumptions are refuted by the pianist herself, as conveyed in a review in the Moscow Gazette of her performances in Moscow in the spring of 1822: “The method of Mrs. Szymanowska is the method of Field, although this artist never knew our virtuoso, did not study his methods, and assures us that she never had good music teachers at all”[31]. Therefore, it was lesser-known Warsaw educators, not celebrities, to whom some researchers attempted to attribute Maria Szymanowska[32]

During her early tours in Moscow, she acquainted herself with the renowned pianist and composer John Field, who had been living in Russia since 1803. The influence of Field’s musical style on Szymanowska’s salon compositions is evident in all her piano works[33]. The polish pianist’s playing was often compared to that of the maestro: in refinement and melodiousness, when the pianist “makes her ungrateful instrument sing” and when, as Mikhail Glinka said, he “doesn’t chop his fingers like some celebrities chop cutlets”[34]. Thus, Szymanowska’s intricate melodic writing is often associated with Field’s nocturnes, proving that she was under the influence of the Irish composer[35].

Among women, the composer was often referred to as the “female Field” and this is not without reason, given her virtuoso mastery of the instrument. The analogy to Field arose primarily due to the vocal expressiveness of Szymanowska’s playing.

On May 2, 1822, in Moscow, Szymanowska performed a concert for two hundred listeners. “She played alone and with Field”, reported Alexander Bulgakov to his brother Konstantin Bulgakov in Petersburg[36]. Prince Shalikov also wrote about Field’s participation in Szymanowska’s concert: “Field, the only Field, standing by the piano and turning the pages of the music, seemed like the animated genius of Mrs. Szymanowska – a beautiful picture!”[31].

Field was so impressed with her compositions that he gave

her a letter of recommendation to his publishing house, the renowned Brietkopf and Härtel, dated July 7, 1819, from St. Petersburg:

Je ne puis me dispenser de recommander à vos soins et à votre considération une Dame qui se distingue par ces talents en Musique, et donc les premières productions sont déjà sorties de votre Presse c'est Madame de Szymanowska de Varsovie veuillez Messieurs encourager cette personne capable d'écrire de bons choses en faisant avec elle les mêmes accords que vous faites avec moi pour (ultimé) les impressions des ouvrages qu'elle pourra vous remettre[37].

Having a limited command of the French language, John Field seemingly preferred to correspond with his publishing house in French. The author's inaccuracies and numerous spelling and grammatical errors of Field are preserved. Over time, her works began to be published by other globally renowned publishing houses, including the Milanese publishing house Ricordi. This recommendation letter from the Irishman was undoubtedly an unusual compliment, as Field was not inclined to easy praise; he could harshly criticise any composition or performance that did not meet his high standards. It is known that Field and Maria played duets, and she, of course, performed his delightful compositions. Their audience included representatives of the aristocracy both in St. Petersburg and Moscow[35].

John Field was recognised as one of the greatest pianists of that remarkable era and is still considered one of the greatest pianists of all time today. He played duets with Maria and consistently praised her playing. Maria's playing style was largely based on Field's own style and method of performance[38].

As for the quite widespread assertion that Szymanowska, upon arriving in Russia, refined her piano skills under the guidance of Field, it is essential to remember that in 1822, the pianist spent less than a month in Moscow: by May 21, Petr Vyazemsky wrote to Alexander Turgenev about Szymanowska's

departure to Petersburg and added, "I am giving her a letter to Zhukovsky"(39).

The concerts that Szymanowska gave in Warsaw in early 1827 definitively solidified her reputation as an outstanding pianist. On January 15th, in the National Theatre Hall, seventeen-year-old Frédéric Chopin attentively listened to her performance.

On March 17, 1828, news of Maria's concert at the Philharmonic in St. Petersburg appeared in the press. The press provided enthusiastic reviews of Szymanowska's playing. A Petersburg reviewer, giving a serious assessment of pianist's performance style, noted:

She made her ungrateful instrument sing. A significant benefit in this regard was her opportunity to study the method of the first singers of Europe, especially close interaction with Madame Pasta... Her technique is subordinated to expressiveness and never becomes an end in itself. Astonishing transitions from powerful fortissimo to pianissimo, from pianissimo to crescendo, from crescendo to decrescendo, impress connoisseurs. Her performance approaches the singing of the human voice – especially in the adagio. And this is perhaps the most characteristic feature of her performance(40).

On April 16, 1827, St. Petersburg newspapers reported that the "first pianist to their imperial highnesses", Maria Szymanowska, would give a concert at the residence of her excellency Daria Alexeevna Derzhavina near the Izmailovsky Bridge.

"The generous hostess, out of love for the elegant, yielded her magnificent hall to Mrs. Szymanowska" wrote the "Northern Bee".

Anyone who has not heard Szymanowska's playing in this concert cannot have an idea of her talent. In this hall, not a single note, not a single movement passed without effect. What feeling, what passion in her playing! We won't even mention agility and speed: those are necessary conditions for a virtuoso,

but in Mrs. Szymanowska’s playing, there is soul – that’s what we can say to explain our feelings.

She observed how productively and successfully her compatriots worked in Russia: the composer Jozef Kozlowski and the pianist Ivan Kozlowski, artists such as Alexander Orlovsky, Józef Oleshkevich, Walenty Vankovich, and Wincenty Smokovsky. Szymanowska returned to Warsaw, and in the autumn of 1827, she, along with her children, brother, and two sisters, travelled to Moscow. There, they were surrounded by the care of the Vyazemsky family, the Musins-Pushkins, the Gorchakovs, and Zinaida Volkonskaya.

Szymanowska decided to move to Russia and stay here permanently. In St. Petersburg, Maria and her family settled on 1st Italian Street, in the house N° 15 of the merchant widow Penitcheva, occupying an entire floor. This house became a focal point for talents “under the shade of friendly muses” where musicians, writers, poets, and artists gathered.

In the years 1827-1831, Maria Szymanowska’s “musical mornings” enjoyed great success. Composer’s Nocturne “Le Murmure” was perhaps her most popular work, published in Paris and resonating in many homes across Europe and Russia. In 1828, the salon of the renowned Polish pianist was visited by Mikhail Glinka. It is worth noting that many of Glinka’s ideas, which had a tremendous influence on Russian musicians and thinkers about music, were disseminated through conversations and interactions in salons.

One of the sources of information about the lives of family and close associates during this period in St. Petersburg is the collection of diaries of Maria’s elder daughter, Elena. She kept a detailed account of household affairs from November 1, 1827, to May 12, 1828, and these diaries are currently held in the Mickiewicz and Slovak Museum in Warsaw(41).

She writes that on November 19th, Vyazemsky and Field were guests in their house – “very cheerful”(42).

Following Field, Ignacy Kozlowski and the renowned composer, pianist, and pedagogue of Czech origin, Josef Genishta, began visiting their house. The summer of 1828 was recalled in the memoirs of Mikhail Glinka:

At that time, I became acquainted with the famous pianist Szymanowska; she had two daughters: Celine and Elena. They sang quite well. I was the maestro at Szymanowska's musical mornings, and they performed my music. There I met the famous poet Mickiewicz; he was then courting Celine, whom he later married.

Alexander Pushkin's acquaintance with Szymanowska took place on March 31, 1828, as evidenced by Elena Szymanowska's records. The fact that Pushkin visited Maria Szymanowska is confirmed by an undated note that has reached us: "With joy, I hasten to express my consent to your kind invitation. I had information about Prince Vyazemsky by chance; he must be with the princess right now. Accept, madam, etc. Alexander Pushkin".

The Moscow salon of Princess Zinaida Volkonskaya existed for a little over four years, from the end of 1824 to the beginning of 1829, and occupied a central place in the literary and cultural life of the Russian nobility in the first quarter of the 19th century. Everything in this house bore the imprint of service to art and thought. The names of many of its visitors are known and significant. Around the image of its hostess, "the atmosphere of art wafted and trembled". In addition, the collection of antiquities in the Volkonskaya house made a strong impression on visitors and was celebrated in a famous poem by Elena Szymanowska's future husband, Adam Mickiewicz, "In the Greek Room of Princess Zinaida Volkonskaya in Moscow".

Vyazemsky's account remains the most poetic description of her salon penned by a contemporary:

In Moscow, the house of Princess Zinaida Volkonskaya was an elegant gathering place for all the notable and select personalities of contemporary society. Representatives of high

society, officials, beauties, youth, and mature individuals, intellectuals, professors, writers, journalists, poets, and artists all converged in this house. Everything in this house bore the imprint of service to art and thought. It hosted readings, concerts, and amateur performances of Italian operas by dilettantes and enthusiasts. In the midst of the artists and at their head stood the hostess herself. Those who heard her could not forget the impressions she made with her full and sonorous contralto and spirited portrayal of Tancredi in Rossini’s opera.

Juri Lotman, in the book “Culture and Explosion”, points out that Volkonskaya belongs to those ladies for whom the salon became a means of self-realisation, a way to resist the mundane. Lotman sees a shade of defiance in the character of Volkonskaya’s salon since her “aesthetic independence” took on “a decidedly non-neutral character against the background of Nicholas’s orders”(43).

In 1827, Maria Szymanowska was a frequent guest at Varvara Gorchakov’s residence. This is documented in the diary of Szymanowska’s daughter, Elena(44). Additionally, Sushkova-Khvostova recalled that her house on Nikitskaya Street “was a shelter for widows and orphans without means”. Gorchakova was known as an art enthusiast and patron, and she was celebrated for her benevolence(45).

Before lunch, we visited Princess Gorchakova... She is already quite old, always melancholic after the loss of her only daughter, Countess Lydia Bobrinskaya, who, having gone abroad to consult with doctors, died on the way from Paris to Switzerland at the age of 20(46).

Princess Lydia Gorchakova, née Countess Bobrinskaya (1807 –1826), was exceptionally talented. Her life was cut short at the age of just under 19. Lydia had a beautiful singing voice, played the piano, and was seriously involved in composition. In 1824, her authored collection, “Différentes pièces pour le chant et le Piano-Forte composées par la Princesse Lydie Gortchakoff” was

published in St. Petersburg. The collection included eight vocal pieces (four romances, two cavatinas, Andante, and a duet) and five instrumental compositions (cotillion, waltz, quadrille, and two polonaises based on themes by Rossini).

Several French romances and a romance in Russian (most likely her own text) titled “What a feeling, I do not know...” were printed in the music journal “La Harpe du Nord” for the years 1822 and 1824 and in a collection of selected pieces from the same journal for the year 1825. Additionally, an Italian duet by Gorchakova for singing with the accompaniment of a small orchestra was discovered in the manuscript collection of duets from the music library of the Yusupov Archive(47). However, several vocal compositions by Gorchakova, whose existence is known from mentions in music publishing and trade catalogues, have not been found to date.

It’s interesting to note that her childhood portrait, dated 1813, was discovered among the works of Vasily Tropinin. Currently, it is housed in the Toy Museum in Sergiev Posad titled Girl with a Canary.

In 1824, Lydia married Count Vasily Bobrinsky, a Decembrist and member of the Southern Society, who was also the grandson of Catherine II and Grigory Orlov. To support Lydia’s fragile health, the couple travelled to Baden-Baden. However, hopes for recovery were not fulfilled, and the countess died in Switzerland during childbirth. In the summer of 1826, Lydia’s body was transported to Russia and buried in the family mausoleum.

In the summer of 1831, a cholera epidemic struck St. Petersburg. In one letter, Szymanowska mentioned that Zinaida Volkonskaya was “awaiting the Polish Byron” in Italy, while in another, she advised meeting Prince Alexander Gorchakov in Florence, describing him as her “longtime and good acquaintance from London”. Szymanowska herself continued to give lessons and concerts in St. Petersburg and firmly decided not to leave Russia, despite attempts by foreign diplomats to persuade her to

resume concert tours across Europe.

The rapid ascent of the Polish pianist abruptly ended in 1831 with a cholera epidemic. In that fearful year for St. Petersburg, the disease claimed the lives of thousands of citizens, including representatives of the aristocratic class. The official announcement of Maria Szymanowska’s death appeared on July 17 and “The Saint Petersburg News” 19 July 1831. Even during those bloody times, her death evoked universal sorrow and bitter tears from friends and acquaintances and was deeply mourned by them. Stanisław Morawski recalled: “Our Szymanowska, whom I saw not long ago healthy, cheerful, and lively, became a victim of this deadly atmosphere. After enduring several hours of cruel suffering with astonishing courage and incredible composure, she died”.

The Polish pianist was buried in the cholera cemetery “near the village of Tentelovo, three versts from St. Petersburg” and both her grave and the cemetery have not survived. In 2010, in the Necropolis of Masters of Arts at the Alexander Nevsky Lavra, a cenotaph (memorial sign) was erected in memory of the Polish pianist. The cenotaph features Pushkin’s words, designed by sculptor Vyacheslav Bukhayev.

There is a tradition of installing cenotaphs (memorial signs symbolising graves) for individuals whose graves, for various reasons, did not survive. The Museum Necropolis of Masters of Arts appears to be the most fitting place for the cenotaph of Maria Szymanowska. Reminding people of the “queen of sounds” in the midst of her contemporaries and friends, in a place intended for meditation and reflection on the glorious pages of St. Petersburg’s culture, seems quite justified.

The cenotaph for Szymanowska near the southern fence of the Necropolis of Masters of Arts partially recalls the vanished necropolis. It is a massive granite block shaped like a piano, with a polished front part depicting the piano keyboard. Bronze letters resembling piano keys form the inscription in Polish: “In Memory

of Maria Szymanowska". At the bottom of the monument, a Latin inscription Ad Memoriam ("in memory") indicates that this sign is not a tombstone. The Russian text reads: "Polish pianist Maria Szymanowska". A bronze plaque above the keyboard contains Pushkin's lines dedicated to the remarkable Polish musician.

The position of Maria Szymanowska in the society of the first half of the 19th century, despite the respect she garnered from fellow musicians, did not define her recognition as one of the symbols of the European performance school. Perhaps, today, her place in the history of Polish performance is considered more significant - in the 21st century, much is subject to reassessment, as her name was soon forgotten after her death.

Her performance art rightfully places her as a precursor to Chopin's mastery of the piano. Szymanowska, to some extent, preceded Chopin himself, as the way she used and developed native Polish music, its forms, rhythms, and idioms, was perfected by her compatriot.

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17 - Wenzel Johann Tomaschek: Autobiography (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), p. 348.
18 – Maria Szymanowska: Album musical de Maria Szymanowska 1789-1831 (Paris: Polish Library Musee Adam Mickiewicz), p. 26.
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20 - Maria Szymanowska: Album musical de Maria Szymanowska 1789-1831 (Paris: Polish Library Musee Adam Mickiewicz), p. 27.
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22 - Igor Belza: Maria Szymanowska (Moscow: Publishing house of the USSR Academy of Sciences, 1956), p. 64.
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24 - Maria Szymanowska: Album musical de Maria Szymanowska 1789-1831 (Paris: Polish Library Musee Adam Mickiewicz), p. 35.
25 - Maria Szymanowska: Album musical de Maria Szymanowska 1789-1831 (Paris: Polish Library Musee Adam Mickiewicz), pp. 55-62.
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46 – Lydia Gorchakova: “Musique de chant. Collection of duets” from the the Yusupov Archive. Beginning of the 19th century (copy made in 1827), 204-229.
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